

ARTICLE APPEARED

ON PAGE C-7

WASHINGTON POST

7 August 1983

Jack Anderson

Out of Control in Nicaragua?

There is now hopeful talk in Washington of a negotiated peace with Nicaragua. But at the battlefield level, the talk is only of war—and, increasingly, of war that would involve American troops.

My associate Jon Lee Anderson is the only American reporter who has marched with all three of the anti-Sandinista rebel groups fighting inside Nicaragua. He has also visited the Sandinista troops on the other side and leaders of the Marxist regime—which is the target of the CIA's supposedly covert operations. Both the Sandinistas and their opponents stressed the importance of U.S. aid to the rebels.

My associate's most depressing discovery was the open skepticism with which the combatants view the chances for a negotiated settlement. They all

seem determined to settle the conflict by force of arms.

And because the guerrilla groups are no match for the Sandinista army—the largest in Central America—the only way the anti-communist rebels can hope to overthrow the Managua regime is to draw the United States ever deeper into fighting.

Even if the Reagan administration succeeds in its stated goal—ending Sandinista aid to the leftist guerrillas next door in El Salvador—there is no guarantee that it could hold up its end of the bargain and call off the Nicaraguan rebels.

The anti-Sandinista forces have never agreed with this Reagan administration goal; they are fighting for nothing less than the overthrow of the hated Marxist regime in Managua.

They will continue their struggle no matter what agreement the United States and other outside interests manage to reach with the Sandinistas.

Yet it seems clear that the American public will not stand for the use of U.S. combat troops in Central America—a political reality that both Congress and the White House recognize. But what is equally clear is that there are forces at work determined to suck the United States into a direct military commitment in the region.

Honduras, meanwhile, is preparing for war with Nicaragua. Some of its military leaders feel a military showdown is inevitable. They are encouraged by the joint exercises putting some 4,000 U.S. combat troops in their country.

Here's the dangerous scenario my

sources are concerned about: Nicaraguan rebels, emboldened by the U.S. military presence in Honduras and off the coasts of Nicaragua, would launch more daring strikes into Nicaragua from their Honduran sanctuary.

The Sandinistas would respond to this threat by "hot pursuit" of the rebels into Honduras. The Honduran army would try to repel the invasion, but would be no match for the Soviet-equipped Nicaraguan government troops. Honduras would then call for help from the U.S. troops so conveniently at hand.

If this seems farfetched, consider the statements of Col. Ronny Herbert Martinez, the Honduran commander on the Nicaraguan border.

"We need more help from the United States," Martinez told my reporter. "The problem of Nicaragua has

to be stopped. Little strikes like the ones the rebels are carrying out won't do it. It needs a big hit."

The colonel then explained that a "big hit" is only possible if President Reagan gives a clear commitment to send in U.S. troops "if necessary," and guarantees massive military aid to Honduras, with no strings attached.

"The Americans have to wake up and realize they either have to be willing to do what it takes to stop communism here, or fight it on their own borders in a few years," said Martinez. "We are just pawns in the Marxists' chess game. They don't want Honduras. They want the biggest prize: the United States." Is war coming, then? "Yes," said Martinez. "It's inevitable."

© 1983, United Feature Syndicate